

# Language and Culture for Businesses

## LCB

## UK

### Language Training



## Good Practice Executive Summary

The LCB Language & Culture for Business Programme consists of a series of projects from 1998-2009 focussed on language training for SMEs. The project is managed by the University of Bedfordshire (previously Luton) in Luton using a range of funds, including ESF, HEFCE and Leonardo.

Several approaches have been taken to the delivery of the programme, most of which have involved a consortium arrangement with universities and colleges. During a 2-year period in the middle of the programme the project became national in scope and ran in 4 other English regions. In one project training was delivered by video-conferencing to 3 learning resource centres.

A total of 3000 staff from 1600 companies have been supported by the programme. Of these, 2675 have been engaged in direct classroom learning and the remainder on the distance learning component. The majority of learners were employed by SMEs in the East of England. 95% of participating companies were SMEs, and these represented a wide range of sectors.

The programme has developed its own business language materials based on the identified needs of participating SMEs. These are focussed on the languages taught by the programme, which have been French, German, Spanish, Italian & Chinese. It has developed a mix of classroom, distance learning, video and online learning materials.

LCB constitutes one of the largest publicly-funded SME language training programmes in Europe. At its busiest period it employed over 40 staff. It is also 3-times UKTI award winner for contribution to international communications for business.

The programme is currently based on the delivery of language training to businesses and students undertaking joint training in 2 locations in Bedfordshire (Luton & Bedford).

## 1. Description & Objectives of Programme

The LCB programme consists of a series of projects run from 1998 to 2009. Most of the projects have a life of 12-24 months. All projects were subject to tender protocols from the managing funding agencies, notably EEDA, GO-East, LSC and the EU Commission.

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The main locations in the East of England in which training has been delivered are Bedford (Beds), Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk), Cambridge (Cambs), Chelmsford (Essex), Luton (Beds), Norwich (Norfolk), Peterborough (Cambs). Video-conferencing was run in the rural villages of Framlingham (Suffolk), Eye (Suffolk), Bungay (Suffolk) and the city of Norwich.

In the early stages of the programme transnational activity was carried out involving partners in Germany (Kiel, Ahaus), Sweden (Malmö) & the Netherlands (Zaanstad).

During the 2000-2002 NLCB project training was delivered in Bolton (North West), Wolverhampton (West Midlands), Sheffield (Yorks & Humber) and London. The latter was also the focus of training during the period 2005-07.

The programme has been funded through a range of funding streams, most notably ESF European Social Fund, Leonardo da Vinci and HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England. The total budget for the programme (including all projects) is to date €8M plus €8M in match funding, contributed primarily from company & project staff time.

The programme is innovative from a number of perspectives. To name but a few: the use of in-house staff to develop training materials based on business needs identified by in-house business recruitment staff ensured that companies received tailored language training. The use of video-conferencing ensured that SMEs in rural communities could be reached. The allocation of some training to larger multinationals meant that their value chains could be accessed, thus providing a better sector approach. A combination of distance learning by internet (ATLAS) and monthly in-company training for those with larger numbers of staff undertaking training ensured the widespread impact of the programme. The collaboration with German partners in Ahaus provided the language input to e-commerce in its early stages of development. The combination of a business-student mix in the classroom brings a range of benefits to both types of learner. The concept of 'cascading' the content of the

training was introduced at an early stage to counter the inability of SMEs to release larger numbers of staff for daytime training. This concept involved the development of training learners in how to pass on their knowledge.

A wide range of stakeholders were involved, in particular employer clusters (such as Silicon Fen, now Food East), UK Trade & Investment international trade advisors, Business Link advisors and several chambers of commerce, in particular those in Luton (Beds), St Albans (Herts), Ipswich (Suffolk) and Norwich (Norfolk). These provided a steady stream of company referrals to the programme. Current activity is focussed predominantly around the Luton-Bedford axis

## 2. EU Policy the Training Implements

The programme promotes a wider knowledge and use of all languages throughout the Union, although a key focus is on the traditionally-taught languages French, Spanish, German & Italian. Chinese is regularly taught on the programme. Culture awareness and 'taster' language training have been delivered in Dutch, Chinese & Arabic. The programme promotes lifelong learning and learner mobility through its video-conferencing, distance learning & transnational elements. It also seeks to improve the quality and efficiency of provisions and outcomes through the development of business-tailored language training materials and the Certificate in International Business Communication. This in turn ensures the provision of the necessary skills and qualifications for the world of work.

The economic priority driving this is predominantly international trade and regional economic growth. The need for language & culture training is clearly highlighted in the RES Regional Economic Strategy's International Strategy and in other documentation (such as the East of England Languages Framework and the Olympics NRE Skills Plan).

The main organisations tasked with ensuring support for projects are the funding agencies. Some limited support is provided by RLN East, although the current project is focussed predominantly around the Luton-Bedford axis, which has a lower proportion of companies enlisted on the UKTI Passport to Export and Gateway programmes.

The continued use of in-house recruitment staff ensures that business needs are responded to in terms of the languages offered, namely Chinese & Spanish. Languages requested by employers outside this remit are currently handled by other project funds such as Train to Gain and ESF. The pricing structure for SMEs has varied across the history of the programme, with the period 1998-2006 providing free language training to company staff on the basis that they contribute match finance in terms of staff time. Hence the courses in the earlier years were run during the working day.

This had the disadvantage that a number of employers could not access the training. Therefore since 2007 the programme has delivered training in the 'twilight' slot favoured by most businesses. This enables company staff to do a 'day's work' before attending training outside the company, and ensures also the commitment of the learners to the training. The current cost to company staff varies according to the size of company, but is targetted at £175 per person for a period of 27 weeks of 3hrs' training. Of the 81 hrs, 54 are class-based, with a further optional 27hrs of 'surgery' input by the tutor.

The impact of the programme has been regularly and thoroughly measured by a dedicated evaluator, and these evaluations are available in the public domain. An key component of the evaluations is the feedback from participating companies in terms of business performance, growth in market penetration and the development of a range of soft skills. An interim evaluation of the recent GCM project is provided on the Lilama intranet.

Components for evaluation have included awareness of business culture, improvement in language skills, performance at work, protection of employment, impact on career prospects and response to the delivery of the courses.

### **3. Main target groups, numbers targetted and trained**

A total of 3000 staff from 1600 companies have been supported by the programme. Of these, 2675 have been engaged in direct classroom learning and the remainder on the distance learning component. The majority of learners were employed by SMEs in the East of England, with the exception of the 2000-2002 NLCB project which included SME staff from other English regions and the 2007 project for London.

A large proportion of learners were in middle or senior management positions, with many coming from small as opposed to medium-sized companies.

In the 1998-2000 SALES Sales through Applied Language Skills project funded under ESF ADAPT a total of 1020 staff from 505 companies. Learners received 5-6hrs of training in once per week from 2-7 or 2-8pm.

In the 2000 NLCB project funded under ESF staff from 730 companies received training.

In the 2000 LeB Languages for E-Commerce project funded under ESF a total of 170 SME staff were trained.

In the 2001-02 LeB2 project funded under ESF a total of 660 company staff received training.

In the 2003-04 B4B Broadband for Business project funded under ESF with EEDA co-finance a total of 33 staff from 32 SMEs were trained through video-conferenced Virtual Learning Environment.

In the 2007-09 GCM project 62 micro-businesses and 43 students were supported by the 2007-09 GCM project.

The current 2009-10 project Learning in Partnership is in its recruitment phase.

Over the period of the programme a range of sectors were represented. These varied across projects, although the average sector representation is as follows: 18% of companies were in manufacturing, 16% services, 15% in ICT & communications, 12% in engineering, 6% construction, 4% electronics, 4% food & drink, 4% textiles and 3% chemicals.

In terms of company size, 26% of companies had a staff headcount of 1-10, 24% had a count of 21-50, 20% had 11-20 employees and 15% had 51-100 staff. 95% were SMEs and 5% non-SMEs.

#### 4. Targetted Levels & Competencies based on CEFRL

A huge range of competences was targetted by the various projects. Around 75% of learners were at beginner or near-beginner level.

Targetted levels & competencies based on the CEFRL											
Languages		Targetted Competencies									
L1	Target Language	Understanding				Speaking				Writing	
		Listening		Reading		Spoken interaction		Spoken production			
		level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency

## 5. Length of Training

This needs to be broken down on a project-by-project basis, however on average progression was based on the OCR CBLC scales, where learners took 192hrs to progress from one level to the next. This was based on 2 sets of 24 weeks of 4hrs training.

Length training it should take to go from one level to the next, for the country											
Languages		Targeted Competencies									
L1	Target Language	Understanding				Speaking				Writing	
		Listening		Reading		Spoken interaction		Spoken production			
		level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency	level	Competency or partial competency

The number of hours of training varied depending on the project delivered. The hours were reduced from 6hrs per afternoon session to 4hrs, as learners often went to their work early to get as much work done as possible and then often travelled up to 45mins to the training venue. Therefore by 8pm learners were unable to focus sufficiently on the training.

During the period 1998-1999 one member of LCB staff was tasked to conduct research into the most effective time structure and the impact on non-attendance at sessions. This research informed later changes to the delivery of the training. A further 2 years of research was conducted by a second member of staff during 2000-02 into learner autonomy and the ability of company staff to deal with problems within distance learning.

Although it was expected that learners would reinforce their classroom training with distance learning or other form of self-study, in reality this could not be assumed and material for the classroom needed to include an element of retrospection and revision. In the middle of the programme period online resource in German and Spanish were made available as remote learning material.

## 6. Quality Assurance of Training

A rigorous system of quality assurance has been in place since the outset of the programme. This is a combination of thorough management control systems, efficient administration, effective coordination across teams (admin, recruitment, development, teaching) and external assessment.

During the materials development phase, external proofreaders were contracted to verify the quality of the materials and whether they were fit-for-purpose. The development process was overseen by a dedicated manager. Revisions of materials were made as the projects generated feedback from participating companies.

ESF and Leonardo funding recommends the use of an evaluator. The programme has employed an in-house evaluator and used external assessors to provide an independent view of its activity. Each project produced a detailed evaluation of approx 90 pages in length on average.

Shortly after its start the programme moved to a split-site system, operating from university offices in the city centre of Luton and a stately home owned by the university in the Herts countryside approx 5km from the city centre. Additional team meetings had to be held in order to ensure that communications were up-to-date and accurate. The use of a centralised project system drive and synchronisation software (Goldmine) enabled information to be updated on a consistent and regular basis.

Feedback from employers was generated from a variety of methods. These included formal survey, taking place at least twice during the lifetime of each project (at interim and final report stages) and verbal feedback via tutors and recruitment (account managers/directors) staff. This feedback is included in detail in the project evaluation reports.

Various methods of assessment have been used. In the early stages of the programme internal assessments were developed and delivered by project tutors under the oversight of an Academic Director of the languages department of the (then) University of Luton. In 2002 the OCR Oxford Cambridge RSA series of CBLC Certificate in Business Language Competence qualifications was adopted. This not only provided an external benchmark but also ensured that extra commitment of learners to the training (as they needed to pay for the cost of the examination). In 2004 the university developed its own internally-accredited Certificate of Business Language Competence.

## 7. Sustainability Options

The 'full' LCB' programme with its high targets, large staff headcount and level of public subsidy has not been possible in recent years. The region has already committed substantial funds to the programme, made even more difficult in the current economic climate.

However, the programme has responded to this environment by pursuing a more geographically-focussed delivery and innovative approach through the use of the business-student mix. This has enabled the university to draw down national funds without the recourse to ESF. This is a strong position to maintain.

Commercial activity is an option which the university has pursued, however its cost structure and the opening of the funding market to private training providers has put increased pressure on pricing for full commercial activity. As most funding streams emanating from EEDA or LSC entail an element of match funding, the employer as customer has become more specific about the amount of company finance it is willing to contribute to language training.

Given the current HEFCE funding mechanisms, the programme restricts itself to 'home territory' ie: the Luton-Bedford axis. The convenience of the M1-A1-A505 road network makes it easier for companies outside Bedfordshire to participate in the programme (especially considering recent road upgrades).

An extension of the current model to other counties through a consortium approach would be welcomed by employers and government. Collaboration has continued under the national Routes into Languages programme. The percentage of companies in the Passport to Export scheme undertaking language & culture planning through the national Export Communications Review scheme could be used as a gauge of potential demand by county: Herts 36%, Cambs 17%, Suffolk 16%, Essex 12%, Beds 10% & Norfolk 9%. The recommendations of the Train to Gain LCIT report could be used to inform future project activity, as one of the key aims of this project was to try different approaches to the semi-commercialisation of language training and feed back on responses from companies, government, brokers & training providers.

## 8. Transferability

Transferability of the LCB in its current form depends on the following factors:

- Lots of money, especially ESF
- A strategic drive within the recipient region to support SME language training
- A network of training providers, especially those with structured systems
- An organisation which agrees to act as central admin & management point
- Consistent business need across the region, with some allowances for local flexibility
- Willingness of participating companies to complete timesheets as their match in kind

Nonetheless, the LCB programme is de facto a combination of several initiatives, and these initiatives could be taken as separate components.

Therefore, we advocate that transferability is not seen as the programme as a whole but in the combination of those components which are of interest to other regions' strategic & funding priorities.

The majority of the programme is based on simple replicable principles, such as:

- Agreement of companies to contribute cost in staff time (kind)
- Agreement of companies to form groups which meet at consistent times in consistent locations
- Government intervention in cash

Similar approaches have been evidence through Fondimpresa (Basilicata), albeit that programme is driven by the trade unions.